



# New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

## IMAGE IS EVERYTHING

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It's called "The World's Largest Collection of the World's Smallest Versions of the World's Largest Things." Yes, you heard that right. I'll give you a minute to process it. It's a real, traveling museum, owned and operated by Erika Nelson of Lucas, Kansas.

You've got to love America. If you do much traveling across this great land, you can find all kinds of world record holding monuments. Like the biggest can of spinach. Or the largest shoe. Or the largest working yoyo. Or the biggest box of raisins that once actually held raisins. Erika Nelson says, "The philosophy seems to be, we don't have much history, but we can build a big chicken."

As a child, Erika's dad would take her on little road trips to see different man-made landmarks, and she loved it. When she grew up, she continued to visit different sights. She earned a fine arts degree and began teaching 3D art at the University of Kansas. She started making miniatures when the idea hit her of creating a traveling road show. She bought a used bookmobile and put windows in the sides where she displays tiny versions of the big versions, next to pictures of the real thing. She criss-crosses the country, taking the landmarks to people who might otherwise never know there was such a thing as the World's Largest Concrete Pecan.

It all sounds silly, but Erika's goal is serious. She hopes to ignite some curiosity and encourage people to get out and explore the country. Her desire is for people to go on the road and see the real things for themselves, once they're aware of them.

We've started this new series talking about what's really the world's largest subject – God and how we relate to him. It feels like I'm trying to paint the world's smallest picture of the world's biggest picture. Last week we touched on the concept of God as Creator, which is a huge topic and we squeezed it into half an hour. My goal, though, for these weeks is not to cover absolutely everything, so much as to point you in a direction and say, "Get out there. Explore. Go see how big this God is."

We talked last Sunday about the tension that's often seen between the Bible and science, and how Christians can feel torn between believing what Genesis says about the origins of life and what science has discovered. But we pointed out that much of that tension comes when we try to read the Bible as if it is a science textbook, when its purpose is something entirely different. The Bible is there to reveal God and his character – not to

give us an airtight description of the creation process. This may sound heretical, but I believe there can be room for some form of evolution in the way God works. While Genesis is definitely clear about God as the source of creation, the book never intended to tell us how God made everything. That's his domain. Scripture is never threatened by new scientific discoveries. Our interpretations may be, but Scripture itself is not. Where there are areas that are unclear or that seem to be in conflict, we can embrace both and trust that God knows the ultimate answers.

Please know that I am in no way suggesting we compromise our commitment to Scripture or that I'm trying to undermine its authority. I will go to the mat to fight for the Bible. I have no problem holding on to Scripture in the face of a culture that views it as irrelevant. In some ways, I think this IS fighting for the Bible – fighting for that bigger picture, for reading it the way God would want us to rather than through a lens of fear. Our desire should be to hear the message that Scripture is really communicating and spend our time fighting for that message rather than battling over issues that may not be the real issues.

One thing that IS clear is that when there is a Creator, suddenly the universe has meaning. No matter what the process, if there is an intelligent designer guiding and shaping it, that means he has a purpose behind it. If you make some thing, you have a reason to make it. Nowhere is that more critical than in God's creation of people.

Let's take a look at what Genesis says about it.

### **Genesis 1:26-31**

*Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."*

*So God created man in his own image,  
in the image of God he created him;  
male and female he created them.*

*God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."*

*Then God said, "I give you every seed-bearing plant on the face of the whole earth and every tree that has fruit with seed in it. They will be yours for food. And to all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air and all the creatures that move on the ground — everything that has the breath of life in it — I give every green plant for food." And it was so.*

*God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning — the sixth day.*

We skipped a chunk of chapter one to get here, so let me recap what we missed. God created the sea, and the land, plants and trees, stars and moons, birds and fish and animals, and the pattern was always the same. God said “Let there be...” and it was so. And God saw that it was good. Again, God said, “Let there be...” and it was so. And God saw that it was good.

Then the pattern breaks. It takes on a much more personal tone. Rather than declaring “Let there be,” God’s conversation turns inward as he says, “Let us make man in our image.” Something is going to be different and special about this piece of creation than anything that has come before it.

There has been a lot of speculation about what God meant when he said “us.” Who was he talking to? Some people have suggested he was using the “royal we” the way the Queen of England refers to herself: “We are not amused.” The plural is a way to capture the greatness of God and his majesty. The difficulty with that idea is that in other places God consistently refers to himself in the singular.

Other people have thought that God is talking to the angels. He convenes a heavenly council and tells them what he is planning to do next. The only problem with that theory is that angels weren’t involved in creation and we’re not made in their image, so it doesn’t quite match the language of what God said.

A third option is that this conversation is happening between God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. It is an expression of how united the Trinity was in the creative process and that somehow the unique creation of humanity will reflect that unity. We read last week how the Spirit was hovering over the waters at creation. We heard God the Father speak the world into being, and Jesus is the Living Word. So there is this tight display of all three in action.

Now the first readers of Genesis wouldn’t have identified the concept of the Trinity in this passage, but I think God saying “Let us create man in our image” at least hints at the fullness of God and how each person and part of his being came to the table for this special project of making humanity. Think of a swimmer getting ready for a race, standing on the edge of the pool. Their mouth drops open, their shoulders rise as they take a huge breath -- trying to inhale as much air as possible before they dive in.

This little pause in creation has a similar feel. God taking a deep breath, summoning all his strength, all his personality, bringing as much focus as possible before he dives into his crowning act of creation.

And then he does it. He makes people in the image of God.

In Latin they call it the Imago Dei. It has a nice sound to it, doesn’t it? Imago Dei. You just feel more important when you can say something in Latin. I always used to think it was funny in seminary when professors would say something in another language like

“sitz im lieben” or “parousia”, as if rephrasing something in a language the class didn’t understand added any clarity for the rest of us.

And whether you refer to the Imago Dei or image of God, the real issue is clarity, not how it sounds. To say we’re all created in the image of God sounds very positive and good, but do we really know what it means? It’s one of these big concepts we’ve been talking about, and it’s hard to pin it down and define in a meaningful way. But I think it’s important to try, because we’ll see as we go along here that what we believe about the image of God has far reaching implications. But the question is not just “What is the image of God?” It’s really “What does it mean to be human?” According to Genesis, those two answers will be inseparable.

From God’s perspective, his image is THE shaping influence that gives our lives meaning. So it’s not some abstract concept that doesn’t relate to us. It’s one of the most central issues we can tackle.

What is an image? For our purposes, we’ll define it this way:

*A description or representation of something that creates a mental picture of it for someone else.*

The miniatures in that traveling museum were images of the real spinach can or paper cup, not because they were clones of it, but because they represented it in some way on a smaller scale. They looked like the real thing.

When Annika was first born, we called her my “Mini Me,” because she looked just like me. Same eyes. Same mouth. But no grey hair. You see kids who look like their parents and you say, “Wow – she’s the spitting image of her mom.” But God isn’t a physical being. He doesn’t have freckles or dimples. He’s spiritual. So being in his likeness has to have a meaning beyond appearance. And yet it still has to mean in some way creating that mental picture that an image is supposed to.

There are several different ways to think about how it is we are in God’s image. You could think in **Structural** terms. The way we are wired is what reflects God. Something about our design is similar to him. Typically, theologians have started by asking, “What makes us different from other animals?” They’ve pointed to our ability to think, talk and love as markers that are unique to humanity.

I can remember being in Sunday School classes as a kid and having teachers say that since God is Father, Son and Spirit, humans have body, soul and spirit and that’s how we’re created in the image of God. Other times, I’ve heard that it’s our free will that is most like God. You can debate what people identify as being “the” defining feature of the image of God, but by and large a structural approach to the question zooms in on those qualities we see as being most Godlike in humanity.

There can be limitations to that kind of approach, first because God himself doesn't label which part of our humanity relates to his image, so we're always guessing a bit. We can see some of God's image in the structure of all creation, too, so it's hard to draw that clear line. And secondly, there's not necessarily anywhere to go with the information once we have it. We can compare ourselves side by side with our Creator, but that exercise may not be all that helpful to us in knowing what it means to bear God's image.

That's where another way of tackling the question comes into play, which is what you could call the **functional** approach. If we have God's image, what do we do with it? Back in Bible times, kings would set up a statue of themselves in cities they conquered.

Their purpose in doing that was NOT to have everyone gather around and say, "I think the nose is too big, but they got the beard right." It isn't the individual characteristics and their resemblance that matters. What's more important is that the statue is sending a message. It's telling everyone, "The king is in charge of this territory." The image was there to stand in for the ruler and speak to his authority.

That concept can be seen at work when God created humanity. What's the first thing he does after making Adam in his image? He gives him authority over the earth. It's as if God is placing humanity in creation to represent him and the kind of king the universe has.

When you come at it that way, the center focus of God's image is not in what it looks like but what we do with it. Of course, that raises a couple big red flags. First, it makes God's image about what we do, rather than what he did. He created us with it – we don't earn it by filling some role. But it's also hard to identify our function as the center of being God's image because it's pretty clear that most of us don't do all that great of a job being God's representatives. We fall pretty far short of the bar. And that leads us to a third approach to the image of God, which is more

### **Relational.**

Reformers like John Calvin and Martin Luther were big on this point. They would point out that it's our connection to God that results in us bearing his image. If we're not in a good relationship with him, how can we possibly say we're in his likeness?

When Adam and Eve sinned, something happened to that image. Think about your bathroom mirror. Imagine walking in one morning and suddenly it had changed into a funhouse mirror. Not only that, somebody had taken a sharpie marker and scribbled all over it with permanent ink. Somewhere through all that, you could still see your reflection, but it would be distorted and hard to recognize.

Sin had that effect – it didn't wipe out the image of God, but it sure muddied it up. And it's been the same for every human ever since.

So what do you do? You have to find a way to fix the mirror. Or maybe replace it. And that's exactly what Paul says Christ did.

### **Colossians 1:15**

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.*

Jesus is the Imago Dei. If we're looking for a definition, there it is. The New Testament calls Jesus the new Adam. He restored the image of God to humanity, because he was in a perfect relationship with his Father. He never sinned. He never tainted or warped the image. Christ then offers us the chance to borrow his mirror. We regain our ability to be the image of God through him – not through trying to clean up and glue back together our own mirror.

### **Colossians 3:9-11**

*Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.*

To find a relationship with Christ, then, is to find far more than forgiveness for your sins. It is to find a restored humanity. We begin to relearn what it means to be the image of our Creator. Those bits of your soul that were intended to shine with God's glory can be healed up. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from, Christ offers each one of us the chance to regain what was lost.

In other words, the he image of God isn't quite as fixed as the fact that we walk upright or have opposable thumbs. And it's not something we achieve, because we can't. God instilled it in every human being by the fact that he created them. We could think of it more as a capacity to grow to be like him. That capacity was interrupted by sin, but it is once again possible when we invite Jesus into our lives.

### **Romans 8:29**

*God knew what he was doing from the very beginning. He decided from the outset to shape the lives of those who love him along the same lines as the life of his Son. The Son stands first in the line of humanity he restored. We see the original and intended shape of our lives there in him.*

Think of God's image in us as being like a tiny seed. All the potential for a big tree is there, but not fully formed. We grow into his likeness – it's not something that is seen immediately and completely.

So what begins to show up in our lives? Where does this image of God business affect our world? One of the first areas is

### **How we see ourselves**

In our culture we have extremes when it comes to self image. On the one hand we have a celebrity mentality where everyone thinks they have the right to be treated like a god. We all deserve whatever we want and secretly think we're better than people around us. But when we remember we're made in God's image, we get the not-so-subtle reminder that we're not the original ourselves – any glory we have is reflected glory. What seems like it could be a point of pride (that we're made in God's likeness) actually has within it a true basis for humility.

But there are probably more of us at the other extreme of self image trouble. Most of us can relate more to feeling worthless, insecure and unlovable. People turn to every kind of self-medication to cope with how they feel about themselves. From food to alcohol to drugs to sex to shopping to whatever – we grab for anything that might numb the pain of not being good enough, of not being loved.

Into that void comes God's reminder that he made each of us in his image. We have worth that can't be drummed out of us by anything in this world, because it's not attached to anything we do or anything that's been done to us. God values us because he made us to share in his likeness. He's dignified us in the very act of creation.

But it even goes beyond that. Did you see last year that one of Stevie Wonder's grammy awards was stolen? It was one he had won in 1974 for Best Album. He never filed a police report, but a friend of his saw it come up for auction on eBay. There it was, with his name permanently engraved on it. The cops couldn't do anything at that point, but Stevie could. He bought back his own trophy. He paid over \$37,000 to win the bid.

That sounds extravagant for a man who has 22 Grammys sitting in his living room. Who cares about one more? The only comment as to why he did it was, "This one is special."

Listen carefully: We rightfully belong to God, because we bear his image. His name is right there on us. But we've been stolen. So what does he do? He buys us back. He pays an extraordinary price and buys us back with the blood of Jesus. By all rights, he should not have had to do that. And why should he bother with us when he has anything he wants? The answer he would give for each of us is, "This one is special."

You and I matter dearly to God. The image of God gives us dignity twice over. Once because we were created with it, and twice because God thought it would be worth it to buy us back and restore that image in us when it was damaged so badly. If that isn't a good basis for a healthy self image, I don't know what is.

Not only does this concept affect how we see ourselves – it impacts

### **How we treat others**

This is the logical next step. If I believe everyone around me bears God's image, how can I treat them poorly? This is the point James makes when he is discussing how we talk.

### **James 3:9-10**

*With our tongues we bless God our Father; with the same tongues we curse the very men and women he made in his image. Curses and blessings out of the same mouth! My friends, this can't go on.*

Most of the injustices that have occurred throughout time owe their existence to people forgetting that we're all created in God's image. It says right in Genesis that includes both men and women. Yet women have often been treated as inferiors. Paul says we share God's likeness across races, yet some of the worst racists of history have claimed to be Christians. Jesus took time out for the crippled, the poor and the children – all of whom have had their share of being viewed as less than whole people.

Next Sunday is Sanctity of Human Life Sunday. If you've ever wondered why that seems to be a big deal to Christians from all kinds of Protestant and Catholic churches, it goes right back to the belief that every human bears the image of God, and that therefore their life is sacred.

There's a flyer in your program about LifeChoices, a ministry New Day supports here in Federal Way. It's a pregnancy clinic for moms who weren't expecting to have a baby. They're having an open house next week on Sunday afternoon.

LifeChoices is a great example of what we're talking about this morning. Their approach treats the women who come to them with dignity. In all the strong emotion of the abortion debate, churches have clearly stood up and voiced support for the unborn, who certainly need champions. But sometimes I think Christians have done so while trampling over the moms who are also created in God's image and who are often in terrible circumstances. Women contemplating terminating a pregnancy or who have already had an abortion often feel shamed and judged by the church rather than treated as people who also still bear God's image.

LifeChoices is all about saying "We believe in the value of your life and your baby's." They come alongside people in crisis and demonstrate what it means to believe in the sanctity of all human life, giving these women medical support, counseling, baby supplies and more. They put their money where their mouth is – being there to support these women when they're often completely on their own.

This "image of God" idea is relentlessly practical that way. It's not just about big social issues like discrimination. It's about all our personal relationships. Tonight's the Junior High Superhero Party, where all the kids are coming as real or imagined superheroes. Isaac decided he wants to go as Late Reaction Man, delaying his response to anyone who talks to him. I told Karin the other night that I want to learn to be Late Reaction Man. When our kids come to us and everything in me wants to react quickly, can I pause, remember that they're made in God's image and THEN choose my response? To quote James again: "Curses and blessings come out of the same mouth. My friends, this can't go on."

Who do you say the most harmful things about? Your spouse? Your kids? Your boss? People you don't know well enough to say those things about? My friends this can't go on. All our relationships change when we see through the lens of the image of God.

John of Kronstadt once wrote:

*Love every man in spite of his falling into sin. Never mind the sins, but remember that the foundation of the man is the same - the image of God.*

That's so hard to do. Secretly, I'd rather think of myself as a little bit better than somebody else. I like to know that I'm created in the image of God, but I'm not so sure about you. If I could learn to treat everyone with the dignity and worth they deserve, if I could learn to not be dismissive, if I could learn to listen like I'm listening to the image of God, I have no doubt it would revolutionize my world.

I want to go back briefly to something we touched on earlier. Being the image of God has a functional aspect to it, and that means it is also going to direct

### **How we spend our energy**

We've said all along God creates with purpose. If that's true in general, we can know it's especially true when it comes to humanity. There was a reason he wanted us to be made in his image.

First, we're here as his **representatives**. We have a responsibility to think and act in the world in a way that lines up with being God's image. There's that old saying, "You may be the only Bible some people read," and that's probably truer than we think. How many times has someone lent you courage or comfort or confronted you, speaking with the authority of God himself into your life?

There's a very real sense in which to truly be his representatives we have to be in community. Think about that conversation God had within himself when he was about to create humans. There's community within the Trinity. If that's true, it's no wonder God pointed out that he made "male and female" in his image. Maybe it's not that either one bears the image so much as that you need both together to truly express the fullness of the image of God. We're not isolated. It's when we are in relationship with each other that we show to ourselves and the world that representation God designed us to be.

We are providing that mental picture to the world of God's character and nature, and that's a humbling task.

A second aspect to being God's image is that he's made us able to relate to him. We're God's **companions**. By making us in his own likeness, God created us to enjoy him and have a friendship with him. That's not something the rest of creation can claim. We're built to worship him.

That's a tremendous gift.

### **1 Corinthians 2:11-12**

*Who ever knows what you're thinking and planning except you yourself? The same with God — except that he not only knows what he's thinking, but he lets us in on it. God offers a full report on the gifts of life and salvation that he is giving us.*

One of the most basic human desires is to be known for who we truly are. What a great thing to believe -- that God made us to know us, and he made us in a way that we can know him.

Lastly, we're God's **glory**. As his visible image, we are one way to see evidence of how spectacular he is. We're what creates the mental picture of God in all his splendor. That's hard for me to grasp. Just like Romans says, I fall way short of the glory of God.

But God even turns that flaw of ours around and uses it.

### **2 Corinthians 4:7**

*If you only look at us, you might well miss the brightness. We carry this precious Message around in the unadorned clay pots of our ordinary lives. That's to prevent anyone from confusing God's incomparable power with us.*

We are vehicles for God's glory. We might not recognize it in ourselves, but we can see it in each other. I am humbled by all the lives in this church that I've seen radically changed for the better by Jesus. I can see God's glory at work. I can see his image taking shape in the people of this church. And it's an awesome sight to behold.

As God created the world, at the end of each day we're told, "And God saw that it was good." But on the last day, after he had finished making people and looked around at everything, Genesis says, "And God saw that it was very good." It was exceedingly, forcefully, extra extra underlined with three exclamation points good.

Sin has brought a lot of destruction, but it can never erase the reality that what God makes is very, very good. He made you and he made me. And it was good. And through Christ, it can once again be very, very good.

Bearing the image of God is an honor, and it's a responsibility. It's in me for a reason. It's in you for a reason. As you process that this week ask yourself:

Where is God's image most visible in my life?

How I see myself      How I treat other people      How I spend my time

Where is it least visible?

How I see myself      How I treat other people      How I spend my time

Jesus is the image of the invisible God, and he stands ready to give us all we need for God's image to shine through us as well. With that in mind, I want to leave you this morning with words from a prayer by St. Patrick:

Christ be with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise,  
Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of every one who speaks of me,  
Christ in every eye that sees me,  
Christ in every ear that hears me.

Amen.